A sweet spotlight on saccharin [1]

Hello Alice,

I was just reading over your pages on various artificial sweeteners. I was just wondering, if experts have found saccharin to be a carcinogen, how is it still on the market? I use a product called Sugarine, which contains sodium saccharin. Is this safe?

Regards,
Freaked Out

Answer

Dear Freaked Out,

Sweet?N Low or Sweet?N No? That is the question. Saccharin ? a popular artificial sweetener known by its brand names Sweet?N Low, Sweet Twin, and Necta Sweet (in the United States) or Sugarine (in Australia) ? has had a tumultuous history in the sweet spotlight. Saccharin rose to fame as a sweetener because it?s over 200 times sweeter than table sugar, but has no calories. In the 1970s, saccharin was thought to be a possible carcinogen (or, cancer-causing substance) after studies in rats had shown that excessive saccharin could lead to bladder cancer. This led the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the World Health Organization (WHO) to say ?Better safe than sorry,? and place warning labels on any saccharin products about the possible risk of cancer. However, since then, over 30 studies in humans have shown no relationship between saccharin and cancer. In fact, there?s enough evidence now that the FDA and the WHO have both taken saccharin off their lists of possible carcinogens. And though removal from the list means that it's use is currently permitted as a food additive, this approval is pending additional findings from ongoing research on saccharin safety.

Saccharin stayed on the FDA?s naughty list of possible carcinogens from the 1980s until 2000. Because it was in the spotlight for so long, many people still tend to shy away from it when choosing among the many options of low- and no-calorie sweeteners (like aspartame [2] and sucralose [3], which have also had their fair share of attention). Although there?s a lot of evidence suggesting that saccharin is an A-OK choice, the FDA is currently waiting on the results of some studies in Canada that will continue to shed light on any possible negative effects of saccharin. Until more is known, the FDA has some regulations around the use of saccharin, just to be safe. Here are a couple of things to keep in mind:

- The acceptable daily intake of saccharin is 15 milligrams (mg) per kilogram of
bodyweight. So, if you weigh 60 kilograms (about 130 pounds), you could safely consume up to 900 mg of saccharin. At 36 mg per packet (for Sweet?N Low), that would be 25 packets. It's very unlikely you'd consume that much in a day, but keeping these guidelines in mind can help you make choices about using sweeteners.

- Saccharin is not metabolized by the body and thus, it doesn't affect blood insulin levels. Because of this, it's been touted as an attractive sweetener alternative for diabetics. However, emerging studies suggest that saccharin may alter gut bacteria in a way that creates too much of some, not enough of others, and even alters bacterial function (they influence a number of physiological processes) in your body. This change in bacteria has been associated with type 2 diabetes and can result in glucose intolerance in some people. As such, it would be good to be on the lookout for more research in the future to learn more.

- Saccharin is currently approved for use as a beverage sweetener, to flavor vitamins, to sweeten some sugar-free gums[^4], and as a sugar substitute in cooking and baking. One note about baking with saccharin: always consult the package to determine the appropriate sugar to saccharin conversion. Remember, saccharin is over 200 times sweeter!

- Just because a product is made with an artificial sweetener like saccharin doesn't mean it's free of other calories or fat. Artificial sweeteners can certainly help you avoid eating a lot of sugary drinks and snacks, but it's always a smart idea to check out nutrition labels of the foods you choose to make sure you're getting a balanced diet.

- If you decide you'd rather not use artificial sweeteners at all, keep in mind that there are lots of sweet and tasty treats like fruit or seltzer water[^5] that can keep your diet exciting and sweet but still low in added sugar!

Hope this can help you find the sweet spot of being informed about artificial sweeteners!

Alice!

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